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THOMAS LORING,
Editor and Proprietor.

THE CONSTITUTION AND THE UNION OF THE STATES.....THEY "MUST BE PRESERVED."

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SPEECH

OF
Mr. Bynum, of North Carolina,
ON THE
PETITION PRESENTED BY JOHN
QUINCY ADAMS,
FOR THE
Abolition of Slavery, in the District of
Columbia.

DELIVERED IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES, JANUARY 9, 1837.

Mr. BYNUM rose, and said he had not intended to have troubled the House with any remark of his upon the subject which was then before it. It had ever been his unfeigned desire, that it should have been kept out of the walls of that hall, believing as he did, that nothing but strife and discord would attend its agitation either in or out of that building. The question of reception he had been disposed to give the go-by, for the sake of the harmony of all parties, and particularly that to which he had the honor to belong. But, sir, said he, this question has been forced upon us, and upon the House; and he regretted exceedingly, that its portentous consequences, view them in whatever shape they might, seemed to be defied, dared, and almost courted by some of the honorable gentlemen of that body. Was it possible, that gentlemen would still persevere in a course so detrimental to the well being of this nation? Was it possible that they could be so deaf to the warning voice of truth, and so blind to the signs of the times, as not to see the direful state to which their conduct, if persisted in, must inevitably lead. His course, since the first day that he took his seat in that House, had been to avoid agitation on that subject, and he had, in good faith voted for every measure to suppress it.

He knew that there were two parties in that House, and in the country, in favor of agitation, and for political purposes. He was truly sorry that they existed in any section of the country, and was more so to think that any existed in the section from which he came.

It was to be deprecated that any party, or any set of men, whether to the North or South, should be found to use such means to place them into power; but such there were, and this House, and this nation were to feel the effects of their unhalting purposes.

Sir, said Mr. B. I feel mortified to know that I am called on to vote on a subject upon which I have just voted, and have been defeated, and must know that a similar fate awaits me on the decision of this question. Sir, we have been defeated by the imprudence and folly of those who, on this subject, have professed to act with us. It was the weakest stand, as southern men and slaveholders we could have taken. It was one in which we had long seen that we must be defeated, whenever it was put. Why then should gentlemen professing to act with us, holding the same sentiments on this subject, aid in making up an issue in which every man of discernment must have known that defeat was unavoidable, and every defeat upon the most frivolous question on our part gives both strength and encouragement to our enemies? Sir, with politicians of such imprudence, and with so little policy, it is dangerous to act here, or elsewhere.

But to the preliminary question—shall this petition be received? Although we have just been defeated, yes defeated, sir, and shamefully defeated, by the imprudence of professing friends, I shall still vote against the reception of these diabolical petitions, believing, as I do, that they are fraught with the most alarming, dangerous and appalling consequences to the well-being of this country. Gentlemen had contended that we were bound to receive all petitions, whenever presented.—This he denied; true it was, that the petitioners had a constitutional and unalienable right, guaranteed by the Constitution, to petition for the redress of grievances, a right which none, as he had heard, had controverted; for himself, he looked on that as one of the most sacred rights of a freeman, and one which under no circumstances would he disparage or yield. But whenever the petition was made and presented there, in his judgment, this right ended, and the rights of the representatives, or legislation commenced. The Constitution (said Mr. B.) went no farther than to declare the right to petition. It could not have gone farther, from the very nature of things. Why? Because, (said he) it had, the very existence of your legislative body would have been endangered, and its dignity and character placed entirely in the hands of every

senseless and infuriated mob, that might choose to degrade or insult you. The most frivolous petitions from women, children, boys, or lunatics, might be received, at a great consumption of the time of this House, and at an enormous expense to the people; and the whole body, under such circumstances, might be converted into scenes of levity and frivolity, totally destructive of the dignity and character of wise legislation. Such could never have been the intention of the framers of the Constitution; in that august body, there was too much wisdom, dignity and patriotism to presume it.

As reference had been made to the Constitution, he would read the article that had been alluded to, which, it was contended made it obligatory on the part of the House to receive those petitions; and he thought its words would be evidence to show that the "construction" that he had put on it, was strictly in harmony with the direct spirit and meaning of that instrument. Article the first is in these words:

"Congress shall make no law respecting the establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances."

This was the language of the Constitution upon which such reliance had been placed to justify, and make compulsory, the reception of the petition. Sir, (said he,) though the right to apply, or petition, by this article, was dear, he saw not the least in it that imposed it on this House, as a duty, to receive; and the House being under no compulsion to receive, it was left discretionary with them to receive or not to receive; then, sir, to justify the reception must depend on the character of the petition and petitioners; and he was sorry to say that this brought him, from a sense of duty which he owed the people whose representative he was, to comment on and investigate both the character of the petition and petitioners.

What was the character of this petition? from the remarks of the very honorable and distinguished gentleman who had introduced it, (Mr. Adams of Massachusetts,) it was to abolish slavery in the District of Columbia? Was it from the citizens of the District of Columbia? No, but from the good, perhaps he ought to say, better citizens of Massachusetts, three or four hundred miles distant from those of this District. Certainly they were, by far more wise than the citizens of the District, as they could reside at such a distance from them, and tell so much better what was to the interest and welfare of the citizens of the District. He was sure that the citizens of the District felt, or ought to feel, extremely obliged to the good men, boys, women, and children of Massachusetts, for their liberality and patriotism, and general supervision of the welfare of themselves and their District. Such he understood to be the character of the petition. It was similar to hundreds that had been offered at the last session, which, without reception or reading, were referred, where they had been no more heard of. Now, sir, said he, what was the character of the petitioners, and who are they that presume to dictate and instruct this body how to act towards the people of this District? He was sorry to say, from the best evidence that he could obtain, they were a set of low, ignorant fanatics, united with some boys; and he was sorry to say, with women. Yes, sir, the women of Massachusetts had become legislators, and were urging their imbecile, timid men to action. The honorable gentleman from Massachusetts (Mr. Adams) had said that there were one hundred and fifty female signatures on one list, and God knew how many there were on the others.

Mr. B. said he thought it a portentous foreboding, an awful omen, when women were stepping into the political theatre, and calling on men to act, and recommending what subjects they should legislate on. He felt no disposition to go farther into the investigation of the character of these women; it was enough for him to know, that they were females; he felt a disposition towards them of the kindest nature, and was ready to say, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

The boys that had petitioned, he understood, mostly belonged to their Sunday schools, and were almost entirely under the influence of their teachers. The men were generally ignorant, superstitious fanatics, possessing neither religion nor character; few of whom hardly ever saw the Constitution of the United States, and knew still less of the nature of our federal compact. They had no interest in the District of Columbia, and he presumed little elsewhere—all headed though, and led on by artful, designing priests, who, he had not the least doubt, from what he could learn of the most liberal and intelligent amongst them, were at the bottom of the whole of this agitation and excitement.

It was principally the priests in New England and elsewhere, that were stirring up this agitating and exciting subject.—He hazarded nothing in saying, when the subject was probed to its bottom, that that class of men would be found the instigators of this whole system of confusion and iniquity. It was your priests that were seizing upon the superstition and prejudices of your ignorant men, women,

and children. They were the men to be stopped and rebuked before this excitement could be arrested. They were the men behind the curtain, who worked the wires of abolition excitement. Abolition was priestcraft, concocted and brought into existence by their unholy alliance with the superstitious and ignorant of both sexes. These creatures were ignorant of the nature of our institutions, as they are of our local situations and condition. It is to the influence of these gentry, that this House is indebted, more than to any other, for the excitement, disorder, and confusion, that is witnessed on the annual presentation of these harassing petitions.

Such, sir, is a brief review of the character of this petition and these petitioners, who claim, as a right, to have their petitions received by this House. He could not conceive a more degrading condition than this House would be placed in, by consuming its time, at an enormous expense to the Treasury, in receiving and listening to the petitions and memorials of old grannies and a parcel of boarding-school misses, in matters of State and legislation. What light could they throw on a subject? When grannies and misses become legislators, he thought it time for the men of New England to fold up their arms and to go home. The Congress of the United States was no place for them. Sir, what do they know about the nature and condition of slavery in the South? How many of them have witnessed it? Not one in a thousand, nor one in fifty of those meekly priests and their subalterns, whose unholy biddings they do here. These unfortunate creatures deserve the pity, more than the contempt, of the South; but their insinuations we well understand, and know both how to appreciate them and how to treat them, whenever they shall come amongst us.—The South has not been deaf to, nor ignorant of, their designs in relation to this matter; their instrumentality has long been distinctly understood by the southern politicians, and well marked out.

But, sir, if I were disposed to quibble on this subject, I would, from the first article of the amendments of the Constitution, say that the petitioners have neither the right to petition, nor the House the right to receive such petitions. What says that article? "Congress shall make no law respecting the establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances." Now, sir, do these petitioners come within the character of those alluded to by the Constitution? What says the latter clause? "And to petition the Government for a redress of grievances." Will you, sir, mark the object of the petitions alluded to by the Constitution? The right to petition the Government for a redress of grievances. I would ask, (said he,) in what are these petitioners aggrieved by the existence of slavery in this District? They reside, as I have before said, in Massachusetts, without one particle of interest either in this District, or in any one southern or slaveholding State? In what, then, can be their grievance, to justify their petitions? They certainly are not such, then, as the Constitution alluded to in its first amendment, and their interference can only be viewed as officious, pragmatic, and presumptuous, and, in his judgment, did not come strictly within the description of persons alluded to by the article of the Constitution that had been relied on so much to justify their conduct, and which he had just quoted. He saw, then, no obligations imposed on the House by the Constitution even to recognise the right to petition, under such circumstances, and where there was neither grievance complained of nor interest at stake by the petitioners.

The honorable gentleman from Massachusetts, (Mr. ADAMS,) for whom as a man, he confessed he had the highest respect, had worked himself unnecessarily, he thought, into a passion, as though some great and invaluable right was about to be taken from his constituents, and immense injury was to result from the refusal on the part of the House to receive those petitions. But the gentleman did not tell us, in what that injury consisted. Though the gentleman and his constituents might think it an injury to them not to be permitted to interfere with other people's business—other people's morals—and other people's religion, he presumed, that the free and intelligent people of this nation thought otherwise; nor would they consider that honorable gentleman, or his constituents, deprived of any rights, nor inflicted with any injury by their being refused permission to do so.

Mr. B. continued: Mr. Speaker, said he, some honorable gentlemen have said, that we ought to receive the petitions and reject them forthwith: now sir he did not see clearly the force of that reason. If the petitions upon the first blush, were conceived to be unworthy of consideration, why receive them at all to create a disturbance, and to consume most unnecessarily the time of this House, and then reject them. He did not see the force of such a position. The petition was pregnant with the most alarming consequences, and its consideration or agitation here, it was admitted, he believed by all parties, could end in nothing but evil, and most detrimental consequences to the integrity of this Union.

The honorable gentleman over the way

(Mr. Adams,) had said, that courtesy should induce us to receive those petitions and treat them respectfully. Under ordinary cases, he did not deny but that courtesy should be extended to the applications of all persons applying here for a remedy, or for a redress of grievance; but he did not think that reason held good in the present case. Where the Congress of the United States and its known wishes, or at least a large majority of them, were disrespected, and a number of persons continued to harass it, as in the present case, from a spirit of obduracy and pertinacity, as evidently it appeared to him to be in this case, he could not conceive that they were entitled to the least particle of courtesy from that House. On the contrary, he thought it the duty of the House, particularly that part of the body that composed the last Congress, from self-respect, to treat without the least courtesy these petitions that were now proposed for the consideration of the House.—What was the character of the petition? They were identical, in substance, the same that had been presented again and again, at the last session of Congress, and had been consigned to a silent reference, without even the form of a reading, or a hearing, where they yet sleep the sleep of death. Did the petitioners think that there had been any alteration in the minds of members here in their favor? They certainly must, or their conduct could be considered in no other light than insulting and audacious.

They certainly ought to know from what had passed at the last session of Congress, that such petitions had been unfavorably received by this body, as well as by the Senate; then why were they continued, except from a spirit of obduracy and insolence? Such was the character of the petitions, and such were the facts under which they were presented. From this view of the whole circumstances, he did not see how the courtesy of the House would be at all compromised by the rejection of the petitions. In fact, he thought the dignity and independence of the House much more compromised by the reception, than by the rejection of the petitions, whose sole object he seriously believed was to agitate and harass the country, without the remotest prospect of producing a single practicable good. He did not consider himself at liberty, from considerations of courtesy, at any time to inflict a wound on the harmony and peace of this country. He, therefore, conceived that the House was under no obligations, whether courteous, or discourteous, to receive any petitions or memorials so offensively obnoxious, as upon its first appearance, it must be obvious to all, had in contemplation the most extensive mischiefs to the public weal.

The honorable gentleman on his left (Mr. Reed) had contended very strenuously for the right of petition, as guaranteed by the Constitution of the United States. No man had a greater regard for every article of that sacred instrument said Mr. B. than he had. It was his text-book on all constructions of political power; but with due respect to the opinions of that honorable gentleman to the contrary notwithstanding, he must say that the Constitution had in view as well the rights, privileges, and protection of the people's representatives, and consequently of this body, as the people themselves, from which a reciprocal benefit was enjoyed by both, and the protection of each he thought equally necessary to the preservation of liberty, and a proper and free administration of this Government.

Honorable gentleman had contended that the right of petition was sacred, and should not be curtailed or abridged. He would be the last man in that House or out of it, to attempt either; but after petitioning, there the right stopped, and those of the Congress commenced; and it was equally essential to preserve the latter as the former; and the Constitution, and its illustrious framers, had it equally as much in view. The right of reception was not, nor could it be made, a necessary consequence of the right of petition. They were separate and distinct objects in the contemplation of the Constitution, and are necessarily made so for the protection of each. It had been justly and appropriately said, that where the right of Congress to consider began, there the right of petitioners was at an end. If the House had a right to consider the propriety of reception, it necessarily included the right to refuse or reject the reception of that or any other petition, and without maintaining that right in the Congress, the whole body would be subject to continual insult and degradation, which would prove, sooner or later, subversive of our whole republican institutions. When that body became so that it could not protect itself from degradation and insult, it would be time for a dissolution of our political elements, and the reorganization of one competent to the performance of the functions of a better Government.

Mr. B. said, he would now say one word as to the effects and detrimental character of those petitions. Besides the effects of agitation, which had been seized on with so much avidity, by a certain set of politicians to get up an excitement for political purposes, it had produced the most deleterious consequences to those very persons whose conditions they proposed to alleviate.—What southern man did not know, since the agitation of this subject by those wretchedly ignorant fanatics, that the condition of every slave to

the South had been made infinitely worse. He believed there was scarcely a single State in which there existed slavery, which State had not since the stirring of this question by the abolitionists, increased by legislative enactments the severity of their police laws in relation to their slaves.

He knew, of his own knowledge, that the liberties and privileges heretofore exercised and enjoyed by the slaves in the State which he had the honor, in part, to represent, had been more abridged and curtailed since the abolitionists had taken this subject in hand, than they ever had been before, since his earliest recollection; and, from what he had learned from gentlemen from the other slaveholding States, and his own personal observation on that subject, it was a fact almost universal in each and every one; and this was what was called philanthropy by those poor ignorant deluded creatures! Thus they were binding and riveting the shackles, through their ignorance, on the very creatures whom they profess a wish to relieve. Sir, (said Mr. B.) the abolitionists know nothing of the subject about which they would have us to legislate. They know nothing of the feelings of the people of the South on this subject, and they know less of the situation and condition of those about whom they have become so pragmatic, and over whose oppressed condition they would shed so many tears. They are yet to learn that they themselves are the worst enemies that a southern slave has at this time on the earth. They are yet to learn that every effort of their officious and insulting intermeddling with the property of the South, contributes to make the South make that property more secure, at the expense of the personal privilege of the slaves, which we inherited of our ancestors as property under the Constitution of our country; the right to which no southern man or slaveholder would condescend to dispute here.

Mr. B. said the South was easily excited on this subject, from two reasons, the first was, that they looked upon this officious interference with their property, as a national insult, and a personal reflection on every slaveholder. They did not apprehend, that these insolent, intermeddling fanatics, could inflict on them the least injury whatever. They dared them to show their faces among them. They were prepared and well knew how to receive them whenever they approached. Should those ladies however, who had made themselves conspicuous in their petitions pay a visit to the South, he was not prepared to say in what manner they would be received; if they were under arms led on by their holy priesthood, whose handy work was so plainly to be seen in every part of the whole transaction of their deluded followers, he was fearful that their reception might not be so very acceptable; but, under any other circumstances, he would vouch, that against the gallantry and chivalry of the South they would enter no complaint. He most fervently prayed, that if the time ever did arrive, when the people of the North should become so priest-ridden as to engage in this unholy enterprise, that those reverend gentlemen might be the first that were sent on this holy crusade, and placed in the front of the battle. He believed upon their heads rested all the consequences that might grow out of the conduct of the abolitionists, and that their unholy garments would be stained with every drop of blood that would be spilt in this despicable contest, whether by civil war, or from servile insurrection.

He was not apprehensive that that class of politicians would ever be able to inflict any real or extensive injury on the people of the South; no, the people of that section of country defied all the efforts of all the abolitionists in the world; they were fully prepared for them now, and were daily becoming more so. They understood, full well, the unholy ambition of the priesthood who had kindled up this flame to the East and North, and who were now engaged in taking the advantage of the ignorant women and boys throughout the country. Look at the petitions; what one was not headed by a priest of some denomination or other, and filled up in part of women and children, adults and boys? A strict police was only necessary to proclaim their approach, and the measure of their iniquity was immediately meted out to them.

But there was another reason, an apprehension, a serious, solemn apprehension, a dread of holy horror felt by every intelligent statesman, whose heart had ever throbbled with a patriotic emotion, for the bonds that bind together this sacred Union.

Let the first step be taken here—let the first blow be struck—the first enactment made here on that subject—revenge and dissolution of these States, would be the war-cry from the Susquehanna to the Sabine, from the Balize to Mason and Dixon's line. No, sir, you cannot act upon this subject here. Whenever it was settled, he had, on another occasion declared, that it would not be within these walls, nor upon paper—nor parchment—nor by pact—nor compact. The very first attempt to legislate on it would sever this Union into fragments; and it was ignorance—idle—worse than stupidity itself, for gentlemen to shut their eyes, and affect blindness to the consequences that must necessarily ensue from such an attempt—and he had little sagacity, indeed, who did not foresee in this act, the inevitable downfall and prostration of our whole political

fabric. Yes, sir, in the dissolution of this Union would end the fairest Republic that the world had ever beheld, and its downfall be hailed with transport and joy by the kingdoms and popesdoms of the earth. Can we then sit silent and see the germs of our dissolution planting and sprouting, and menacing the entire overthrow of our national existence? Sir, (said he,) no voice should be silent on such an occasion. The people should be aroused from one end of the nation to the other, and the dangers that imperilled them proclaimed in a loud voice.

These clerical mischief-makers—these sacerdotal panders, should be well watched. It was a covert movement, in his opinion, with them, to insinuate the influence of their Church in State, and to enslave mankind, like their predecessors, who had flooded all Europe and Asia, for three centuries, with christian blood, and consigned to the faggot and the flames three hundred thousand souls, victims of that heartless—merciless tribunal—the Inquisition. An ambitious clergy in all ages had proven the greatest curses to national quietude, and happiness of mankind, and had been productive of more calamities to the human race than any one other cause yet known to the history of the world. Like the element of fire, the clergy, in their proper and appropriate spheres, might prove a blessing to mankind; but when they left that sphere, all history had proven that their influence was more destructive than the consuming flame. Their march over the human mind was clandestine, and their influence furtive; their most effectual enemy had ever been an exposition of their designs, when their feebleness became as apparent as their motives were execrable. When the world once saw their designs in their true characters, they had never failed to become not only objects of contempt, but of disgust and detestation. They should be the last on earth to tamper with the rights of an intelligent people.

The slaveholding States would regard the first attempt to legislate on that subject, in the District of Columbia, as an "entering wedge," to further legislation for other Territories and States of this Union, and he would warn gentlemen to pause before they took the first step in a matter, more momentous in national importance by far, than the revolution by which this nation gained its independence, and established on the ruins of arbitrary power, the freest republic for the protection and preservation of constitutional liberty, that is recorded on the pages of modern or ancient history. Let gentlemen pause then, he repeated, before they gave the least countenance or toleration to a practice, or measures, fraught with a train of evils and calamities that unborn generations might yet live to deplore. As wisdom proclaimed that the first spark that fell, that threatened a conflagration, should be immediately extinguished, so true policy proclaimed that the first step about to be taken that threatened the very existence of our Federal Government, and to produce consequent evils that no human tongue could foretell, should be opposed and thwarted upon its very threshold. For one, he had ever been disposed to show them not the last countenance here or elsewhere, and so help him God, he never would, so long as he entertained the least regard for this Union, and the preservation of our present form of Government, which that subject threatened with such immediate and imminent danger.

Mr. B. said the honorable gentleman from Massachusetts, (Mr. Adams,) he thought in the sincerity of his heart, as he had before intimated, was doing his constituents and the northern and eastern people generally, the greatest injury, as well as injustice. If said he, this course of things is persisted in, whether for political effect here or elsewhere, it will be impossible, in future, (such will be the prejudices, that it will excite to the South,) for any gentleman merchant, or otherwise from the north or east, to reside in anyone of the Southern States, or even to travel through any one of these States—many of which have hitherto been to them the mere abodes of hospitality and kindness, without being suspected, as a spy or servile agent, and put to the greatest inconveniences. Such would be the effect of this very misguided course pursued by his own countrymen. Sir, said he, this is a practical view of the subject that I take, and in which I believe that the continued agitation of this subject by the abolitionists, must eventually and inevitably result, and which at no distant day, would amount to an entire non-intercourse between these two communities. He would here ask, if that enterprising people were prepared to do any thing that would so much contribute to oppose their interest, as private citizens, and to destroy their greatest prosperity? If they were a prudent, thinking people, they could not be blinded longer by a designing priesthood, or ambitious, jealous politicians. The project, therefore, of these deluded, ignorant fanatics, would clearly be more injurious to their own neighbors, than to those whom they sought to affect, but who were far, as private persons, placed beyond their baneful influence, and, as such, it was out of their power to affect their private property or their personal safety. It was only in a national point of view that they could affect the South, and that by destroying this Union, which composed this great and benign Government, under which we lived; by effecting which, they themselves were obliged to be the